



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

287 West Street

Rocky Hill, Connecticut 06067

Dr. Linda S. Schwartz, RN, MSN, DrPH, FAAN
Commissioner

TESTIMONY OF COMMISSIONER LINDA S. SCHWARTZ, RN, MSN, DrPH, FAAN

Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs
Presented to the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs
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HB 6612: AN ACT CONCERNING TRAINING FOR SERVICE OFFICERS IN THE VETERANS' ADVOCACY AND ASSISTANCE UNIT

Chairman Maynard, Chairman Graziani, and distinguished members of the Select Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I would like to offer testimony on House Bill (HB) 6612, *An Act Concerning Training for Service Officers in the Veterans' Advocacy and Assistance Unit*, which would require the Commissioner to conduct and submit a study of the existing training program(s) for these classified, union employees of the Connecticut Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA).

As a former Yale researcher and educator, I am always interested in studying ways to solve issues or to improve existing systems. However, as the Commissioner of a state agency with a large client base and a finite budget, I must also protect my staff from unfunded mandates that will take them away from their primary mission of serving veterans. HB 6612 is an unfunded, unnecessary requirement that will not assist the agency in conducting its daily work of serving veterans. In fact, HB 6612 will simply serve to take away staff time and resources from the very agency division it addresses.

I also cannot accept the underlying premise behind HB 6612 – that is, that the training of our nine veterans' service officers is somehow inadequate or ineffective. I believe our employees are the most knowledgeable and effective service officers representing veterans in the State of Connecticut. In order to hold their positions, each must achieve and maintain accreditation with the Federal VA. Each had to complete a formal training course and exam to receive initial accreditation and full appointment to the DAS classification of veterans service officer. Half of our current service officers have over 10 years experience in their jobs. Our DVA service officers have an active caseload of

over 8500 veterans and in Fiscal Year 2008 alone were responsible for earning \$3.6 million in new Federal disability benefits for their clients. These are intelligent, dedicated, and professional state employees who proactively maintain their individual skills and knowledge in order to better assist their fellow veterans.

In order to help keep our service officers current on changing Federal benefits and regulations, in 2004 we entered into a cooperative training agreement with the Connecticut VA Regional Office and other veterans organizations to provide four hours per month of joint refresher training (total of 48 hours annually) to all Connecticut veterans service officers. This monthly training enables service officers to keep current on new Federal benefits/procedures throughout the year, while keeping our benefits offices open to service clients. We are currently working with the other northeastern states to sponsor a centrally-located, regional training session for state service officers which would be accessible by car. Additionally, the DVA attempts to budget an additional \$15,000-20,000 for intensive in-state training of our service officers every two years. We are careful not to expend taxpayer dollars on costly travel to far away, out-of-state training locations.

Most significantly, I am not aware of any pattern of complaints from Connecticut veterans regarding the knowledge or experience of our service officers. Our service officers are some of the most sought after in the state because of their full-time experience and reputation for advocating for their clients.

I have previously provided more detailed information to the Chairs regarding our current training program. I have also indicated my willingness to address any specific concerns, questions or suggestions that may come to the Committee's attention regarding the training of our employees.

There is always room for improvement to any state program or agency. However, that improvement can best be achieved through open and constructive dialogue that can address specific issues. I respectfully request that the mandate of an additional formal study and written report as contained in HB 6612 not be placed on the DVA during this critical time of constrained resources. Thank you.